

MORAL POLICING IN INDIA: A STUDY ON HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The study examined on how moral policing is taking place in different parts of India, especially in Karnataka. I purposively selected 20 students from a place called Mangalore to take part in the in-depth interview where many incidents were reported about moral policing. All the interviews were audio-taped. Qualitative method is used to collect the data. The students' responds included that moral policing is very prevalent in the society and the reason could be because of economic, social and political. Moral policing mainly violates the rights of the individual and curb its freedom. The study concludes that the socio-political and economic and cultural reasons often led to moral policing.

Keywords: *Moral policing, individual rights, socio-economic, political.*

Introduction

Moral policing is a blanket term used to describe vigilante groups which act to enforce a code of morality in India. Some of India's law and some actions of the police forces in India are also considered to be instances of moral policing. Thus, moral policing can also be said as 'an act of enforcing or imposing one's own set of moral values on others.

Sometimes moral policing is based on the ideas of religious belief, cultural practices or sometimes even on the basis of laws, rules and regulations. In most of the cases, moral policing is aimed towards having a good society where pure cultural and religious practices are not polluted by any foreign influences. There are different types of carrying out moral policing. Moral policing can be directed towards an individual, a couple or even towards a group of people if it is found in indulging into activities which are unacceptable by the vigilante group or the people who claimed themselves as moral police who take the law in their own hands in the name of protecting the culture, beliefs and social norms from any harm. The impact of moral policing can be severe on the victims or the individuals who are caught. The victims are harassed mentally, physically and sometimes sadly people are killed.

Different countries have their own way of carrying out the moral policing. When it comes to US moral policing can be in terms of rules and regulations which are imposed on the students in the of dress-code, fashion, dyeing of hair during school premises etc. It is basically rules imposing on students what to do and what not to do by regulating and limiting the rights and freedom of the students. And in the Arab world it is based on cultural behavior and religious practices such as imposing 'Sharia Law' in Saudi Arabia moral police called 'Mutaween' was

formed in order to keep in checked the behavior of the people who are indulged in prostitution, homosexual behavior or women who does not follow the dress code. The Sharia Law also gets affected in countries including Afghanistan, Sudan, and Malaysia etc.

Situation of moral policing in India

The first ever reported moral policing is believed to be in 1990's where a women separatist group 'Dukhtaran -e- millat' tries to threaten with acid attacks on other women who do not wear burkha to cover their face. (Bukhari, September 2001).The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh which is popularly known as RSS or also also called as Rashtriya Seva Sangh which was founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar was popular for its Hindutva which was originally claimed to be cultural protection from western influences and not political. In the early establishment, it originally takes part in Hindu nationalist movement during the freedom struggle of India. However, with the course of time RSS can be seen involving in many political and social activities. RSS claimed that western culture has done damage to Indian culture and thus it must be protected. The activities of RSS has quite spread far and wide and now it is playing the active part in banning or opposing the influence of western lifestyle or culture i.e banning of Valentine's day celebration, showing of affection by man and women is not allowed in public places such as parks and restaurants, control of dress code and also marrying to a different community ie Hindu girl to Muslim boy is also not allowed. RSS claimed that it is a form of love jihad and it must be stopped.

In Muslim community, a Fatwa that was issued in Kashmir, 2012 to stop the influence of western culture has affected many youngsters – 3 girls who wants to pursue music in rock band was forced to quit the band. Sometimes moral policing is also done by the common people or public in some states. The incident of the Kolkata metro where some people harassed a couple just because they were embracing each other. The activities of moral policing sometimes go out of hand due to extreme physical harassment and also the image of the victim is badly affected due to circulation of videos in social networking sites which is very much dangerous. In India, moral policing takes place each and every day even though it is not reported.

Situations of moral policing in Karnataka:

Karnataka, one of the largest State in southern part of India where different people of ethnicity and religion lived together has become the hub of moral policing in India. Many reports of moral police sprung up every day from different parts of the state. In January 2009, a pub in Mangalore was attacked by the Sri Ram Sene by simply barging into the pub and they thrashed the girls and boys and accused them of obscene behaviour. February 2016, a student of Tanzanian women was thrashed and stripped by the mob but later it was a case of 'mistaken identity'. In 2014 there was a case where a man was thrashed for dropping a fellow female employee safely to her house by the Bajrang dal. They later accused the man for love jihad. When it comes to love jihad the Bajrang dal does not leave anything out of their hands. They attacked girls and boys if they happened to be from either Hindu or Muslim just walking on the road or strolling on the beach or even just taking a picture together can rise

storms of issues because they fear of love jihad and that's the one thing they strictly take action into. The fact is that the Bajrang Dal group often backed by politicians or some powerful man who will sponsor them in terms of financial, vehicles and even providing meals. The people often taking part in these activities are drop out students or people who don't really understand what is going on but just follows the crowd, and people who are financially unstable. They will do whatever the upper hand commands whether it is good or bad. This is one reason the failing of system in India. The people who carry out moral policing always take the law in their hands without reporting to the police and they will do justice according to what they think is right. This even leads to taking away of person's life, shaming the dignity of the person and the family and even difficulty of the victim to come out in public places because most of the time victims are left with trauma and fear.

METHODS

Study setting

Karnataka is one of the major State in South India, with a total population of about 61.13 million according to 2011 census of India. 61.43% resides in the rural areas. Kannada as its official language, other linguistic minorities are Tulu, Kodava, Konkani, Urdu, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, Hindu and Malayalam. In terms of population control measure Karnataka is in the forefront, with the world's first two birth control clinics set up in 1930 in Mandya District. The sex ratio of the state is 973. For rural, the sex ratio is 979 while for urban is 963. the literacy rate is 75.4%. Male literacy rate is 82.47% and the female literacy rate is 68.08%. In terms of economy, Karnataka is one of the fastest growing state in the country. It contributes 5.68% to the domestic gross product (GDP) of India in 2014-15. Karnataka is also known as the IT hub of India. It has 47 IT/ITeS SEZs and three software technological parks. It houses the fourth largest technology cluster in the world.

Sampling design

Interview and transcriptions

In-depth interview with 20 college students from Mangalore was conducted through voice recording. These interviewees will be purposively selected based on the region where moral policing is frequently taking place. This will help to find how much they are aware and how much importance they give regarding the issue. Qualitative research methods has been used. There are multiple ways of studying qualitative design though there is no universally accepted approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Creswell (2003) categorized five strategies to qualitative studies, viz., narratives, phenomenological studies, grounded theory studies, ethnographies and case studies. Here the researcher selects case study method.

Findings

The findings begin with the interaction of the three dimensions i.e. social, economic and political background. It explains the reasons and causes which led to the acceptance of such actions of moral policing. The analysis explores the reason behind the acceptance of such act in the society.

Inter Socio- Political reasons of moral policing

Moral policing is a controversial term because its supporters says that they are protecting the so called 'Indian culture' and the youths from being influenced by the westernization or western culture. Moral policing which is supposed to have a positive impact in the society has turned into a kind of system where the vigilante groups or the police misused the power and has negatively threatened the society where people are forced to be punished without breaking any law of the country. In the last few decades, the activities of moral policing is witnessed to be increasing day by day in India and it has somehow become like a way of carrying out normal norms of the day. The people who are the victims or the people who witnessed the moral policing doesn't have the ability to voice out or report it to the police because they know that the police are out of control when it comes to some vigilante groups who are supported by a politician for their own political gain. But it is sad to know that it has gone extreme in terms of control they have in the society. The activities includes banning of films/movies, banning of celebrating valentine's day and vandalizing the shops which sells flowers and gift shops on valentines occasion, lynching people involved in love etc., the most shocking thing is that nowadays schools and colleges have taken part in moral police by imposing rules for girls to dress in a certain manner and to keep distance with the boys during the school hour.

When it comes to society taking part in moral policing, some people who do not belong to any of the vigilante group but still carry out moral policing (citing an example) The incident of the Kolkata metro where a couple was harassed by the middle age men just because they were giving a hug, this itself shows how the society takes part in moral policing without given any authority to do so lawfully. Some of the witnesses stood up for the couple and they were safe from the hands of the harassers. If they were not helped by the other people their fate could have been different. In many of the cases the victims are publicly shamed and sometimes it can even lead to lynching of people and burning down houses etc. In a country where there is so much of discrimination among the people in the name of religion, caste, culture and tradition has come in handy for most of the people to get away with unlawful deeds and of the action is moral policing.

Moral policing as mentioned above are carried out by either the society or vigilante groups. When we talked about vigilante groups it is clearly witnessed when we come across the news and media outlets that the Hindutva group which is known as Rashtriya Swayamsevak or RSS as well as its other family of organization such as Bajrang Dal (youth wing) of the Vishva Hindu Parishad actively taking part int the moral policing. Their main ideology which is based on Hindutva its meaning 'Hindu Nationalism'. The name of the youth wing Bajrang is a reference to 'Hanuman' a Hindu deity. Their motto is 'Service, safety and culture'. The group is often seen taking part in activities of moral policing especially in the southern state of India i.e. Karnataka. In the early days, the RSS was a prominent organization which promotes Indian culture and propagates the Hindutva ideology. However, with the passages of time the organization is seen involving in carrying out the actions of moral policing on youths in a very negative manner.

It is not only Bajrang Dal who actively takes part in moral policing, there are also Muslim vigilante in Mangalore. Once a Muslim man who was hanging out with a Hindu woman coworker, he was caught by the Bajrang Dal and was thrashed, stripped and he was tied to an electric pole after that incident came to light both the Hindu vigilante group and the Muslim vigilante group kept in watch on boys and girls every alternate days and weeks (scroll.in,28 aug.2015). This is an example on how the difference in the religious community is being used in the name of moral policing.

Political reasons:

“The coastal Karnataka has been BJP’s traditional stronghold and has always won majority seats in assembly elections through the so called ‘Hindutva laboratory’ (THE PRINT)It is also well known that most of the active workers or members of the Bajrang Dal often aims to become a well-known politician later. After taking part in all those social cause for the Hindu community, the person join politics contest in the election. And sometimes people who carry out this kind of activities are backed up by a big power who also involved in the politics. It shows that the person who takes part in such group activities has a mindset of dream in politics. Since either they are backed up by a powerful person they do not have any fear of being arrested and also the police did little or nothing about it. The police also take part in moral policing in some parts of the states. There are numerous incidents and video circulating in social media how the police were tackling the couples and youths who are sitting together in a park were raided and questioned them, giving them moral lessons then and there. In the state of Uttar Pradesh, an anti- Romeo squad police team was appointed by the government in order to provide safety for the women and children against the crimes committed towards them, to the contrary it was reported (THE WIRE) that the anti-Romeo squad was ‘doing the opposite of what they are supposed to’.It turn out that the police were found harassing young boys and girls who hang out together even those who are just friends, everything was just not seen normal in the eyes of the police and mostly boys were targeted. The power invested on them are seen to be misusing

The police who are supposed to take care of the people by ensuring security and take care of law and order are not doing their duty for what they are assigned for instead they are misusing their power and harassed the people instead. The actions are clearly a violation of human rights and invasion of privacy of the citizens. Two Uttar Pradesh cops was seen assaulting a woman for being a friend with a Muslim man (NDTV sept,2018) both the man and the women were medical students who were allegedly attacked by the right wing of Vishwa Hindu Parishad and handed the two victims to the police. The two police cops were seen in the video, assaulting the girl and was asked by one of the woman constable ‘why choose a Muslim man over Hindus’. This is socially and politically related as the two victims were both from a different community and it was seen an easy target by the police as well as the right wing to condemn the so called love jihad.

Responses from the in-depth interview:**Reasons and factors that influenced the activities of moral policing**

The mindset of the people. The people are narrow minded and feels very much threatened about the culture being tarnished in the name of development, globalization. They feel that girls and boys should not hang out together or celebrate a party as it is very much not Indian culture and this kind of behavior is not acceptable in the society. The feeling of difference of culture between the two communities that is between Hindu and Muslim. There is a certain vigilante group who feels that it is not okay for a boy and a girl to hang out if they are not from the same community. To make them realized that they are doing something wrong they will thrash them then and there..

How should people cope up with the moral policing?

As a citizen of the country a person should be well aware of their rights so that when something unfair is done to them they can fight against them. Knowing that someone is encroaching the rights which is by law not at all allowed to take away forcefully by any person. If at all something unjust is done to them they must file a case to the police so that justice is served to the person who deserved.

Socio-economic and political reasons that led to moral policing

Yes, there are social, economic and political reasons for moral policing. First of all in social, the mindset of cultural difference and community and also how people judge one another in terms of dress, behavior etc. In terms of economic, mostly people who joined the vigilante group are youngsters who had no good educational background as they are not financially stable so in order to gain the two meals a day and some extra money they don't dare to think what is good and what is not. Mostly this kind of activities are promoted by BJP and used as a tool to collect votes trust from the Hindu people. It is used as a political instrument to bring the people together by emotional blackmail and divide the people's opinion by planting the seed of seeing other religion or community as a different and threatening. The leaders of the vigilante group have a political agenda by carrying out such activities and get involved in politics. The successful politician often takes care of large group of such and used them to carry out his orders whenever he wants. The outsiders are also targeted as well. When it comes people partying in their own private house or hotel room the vigilante group doesn't identify as local or not they just thrashed and harassed them. Be it at the bar or any public/private space etc. Identity politics has come to light after seeing the activities and ideologies which is carried out by the RSS. It has come out as one of the reason used as an instrument during elections.

Is there any political parties that involved in moral policing?

Political parties to some extent involved in moral policing indirectly because in the case of Bharatiya Janata party, the RSS and VHP, here the youth wing takes part in moral policing but the party leaders do not come into direct action. However, the leaders use slogans as a weapon of campaign to get votes from the people. The members of RSS and VHP actively

carry out the moral policing, there are reports frequently that the vigilante groups kept watch even in public spaces so that boys and girls of different cultures and community do not mingle.

Do the people or public support moral policing in any way?

Yes, almost 30% of the people supported the activities of moral policing. The people are brainwashed by the ideology the vigilante group put forward and some people believe that it is true. Some people also supported the activities of moral policing in a way where they felt that the Indian culture is at stake and endangered since the westernization the youths are more open minded and they are free in terms of food habit, dresses. The vigilante groups believed that it is their sole responsibility that this type of action are not accepted and must be taught lesson about the factors affecting the Indian culture.

How do the youth react about moral policing?

The youth in most cases keep their mouth shut and just enjoy the scene because the they are scared of the consequences they must face if they ever stand up against it. Sometimes the youth are more helpless because a simple act of being friends and taking picture with a Hindu girl can land the boy into trouble if ever the vigilante group came across it. Many incidents of such kind happened in schools and colleges because of the schools and colleges impose rules and regulations where boys and girls are supposed to keep distance among them. It is because of such reasons the youths are scared and feel threatened and they are more careful to get involved.

Which age group is more targeted and why?

18-30 that is the youth are more targeted because in this stage of age the people are open to do what they want and expressed themselves either in dressing sense or food habits they are more open to mingling with any group of people. This is the reason the vigilante group targets them, reports of attacks on youth celebrating or partying by the vigilante group are common in Mangalore.

How do the police react to the situation of moral policing?

In some case the police themselves takes part in the activities of moral policing, they aim in ensuring the safety of women. But they end up invading the privacy of the people and sometimes the police often harassed the people. The police also arrest the culprits, but the culprits can get away with it as they are backed up by some powerful man. The police are helpless and they ought not to involve as the vigilante groups have done more harmed even before the victims are brought to the police station.

Is moral policing taking place in educational institutions as well?

In educational institutions rules are imposed on students on how they should dress, not to mingle and sit with boys. Since the issue is about involving an outside vigilante groups the educational institutional are more careful so that no students should face harassment and

assault. Sometimes it can go the extreme and it is just violating the fundamental rights of the students as a citizen.

To what extent moral policing takes place in day to day life?

Most of the cases, moral policing are not reported however it can be said that almost 1000-5000 people face moral policing on daily basis. Since the people know that nothing can be done in order to fight against the issue, it has become a part of everyday life as a normal thing and find a way to accept that it will happen no matter what they go through.

What happens to the victims of moral policing?

The victims are felt with shame and they are left with little or no dignity, they face harsh criticisms and often it leads to suicide when they become prone to emotionally drained. Due to the society's pressure and the culture of keeping the family reputation first, the family members if they are supportive the victim regained the strength to continue to live but if the family also started abuses then it often leads to suicide. In India there is something called honor killing which is committed by the family members itself. It is one of the most unfair way of dealing with the societal pressure.

DISCUSSION

Through this study it is found that moral policing is very much prevalent in the society. The issue is very much neglected and not taken importantly because it is helping certain political party to propagate their ideology and has given them political gains in the elections.

Moral policing is very much threatening to the people about their rights and the peaceful co-existence. No one has the right to forcefully take away someone basic Fundamental rights. The attack on youths even in their private home, attack on bars and also banning of Valentine's Day celebrations, vandalizing of shops which sells valentines cards and flowers etc. No one has the right interfere in someone else's life. The authority given to the police in UP and creating anti-Romeo squad has proven how much negative impact it has created by giving them the authority. Even though it was created to give security and control the crimes committed against the women, it was more kind of infringement of someone else's privacy. The youths were arrested, questioned them and unnecessarily punished them. Even if the idea of this movement is about protecting women, it did not prove anything rather it has done more harm by causing communal hatred when it is targeted to another different community. Many movements were started to fight against this unjust way of policing e.g. the kiss of love campaign in Kerala and many other more. The truth is the issue has gotten much bigger that the powerful vigilante groups have grown stronger and larger in number with powerful politician at their back. It has now become very much difficult to fight against moral policing. First of all, education to be made compulsory and people should be made aware the importance of education. Education will enlighten the people that there is so much more than being confined to conservative society and being more open minded to developments. People should also be made aware that instead of focusing on imposing moral policing to the people

they can be focused on serious issues such as poverty, education, infrastructure developments etc.

Frequent campaign to be carried out in the society both in rural and urban. The citizens should be aware of their basic rights to fight against those unfair punishment and publicly shaming. The idea of diversity should be spread among the people, also it should be taught in schools and educational institutions. Diversity is something which should be appreciated and celebrated as it adds color to the nation. One of the main issues face in India is illiteracy, people are associated with only the traditional and cultures which are orthodox in nature and they are not willing to accept the new modern way of cultural lifestyle. Everything which is not so Indian in nature whether it may be a dress, a girl going out at night alone or with boys is something considered as much uncultured and people believes that it is doing harm to the society.

CONCLUSION

Moral policing has threatened the peaceful co-existence of different communities in the country. The extremist group of the certain groups such as RSS and VHP actively take part in the moral policing. When RSS was formed their ideology was based on protecting Indian Culture but in due course of time their focus also take turn in protecting the Hindu girls from marrying a Muslim man as they fear that the conversion is taking place in order to over-take the Hindu community. The people in Mangalore are prone to moral policing because the youth right wing are very much active and also the politician are supporting the activities of moral policing. The police who are supposed to give protection and security of its citizen by enforcing law and order are often witnessed taking sides with the vigilante groups which makes the people helpless to approach for seeking protection and security. The government who is supposed to give security and secularism to the people failed to do so because in most of the places in Karnataka where moral policing is very active, it is ruled by the political party which supports the RSS and VHP. Even though the government takes a strong step in implementing laws against unlawful moral police, it doesn't provide much help because the vigilante group are too strong and powerful. The people failed to speak out about this issue because they are not aware of their rights, they are ignorant about their freedom. And for those who are brave enough to speak out they are silenced even by the police. The mentality of the people being too conservative is one such reason for moral policing. The basic fundamental rights i.e. right to life, liberty freedom and right to privacy are threatened when it comes to moral policing.

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